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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential contributions of a feminist critical perspective to an understanding of assessment in higher education. It uses as a foundation the nine principles of feminist assessment (published in 1992 as an outgrowth of a project on women's studies programs) and an American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) list of nine principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning, which concern themselves with values, student-centered assessment and the influence of institutional culture on assessment. The paper discusses the beginnings of the assessment movement in higher education in the United States, various assessment principles, compares the feminist principles with the AAHE principles, and describes how various institutions use feminist principles in their assessment activities. In another section the study discusses two important contributions of feminist theory to assessment: the understanding that power and politics underlie issues of knowledge; and as an activist perspective, the idea that feminist theory can transform as well as inform educational practice. A table listing the principles of feminist assessment and the AAHE principles of good practice for assessing student learning is appended. (Contains 24 references.) (CH)

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Feminist Assessment: What Does Feminist Theory Contribute to the Assessment Conversation?

by

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, November 6-9, 1997. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential contributions of a feminist, critical perspective to our understanding of assessment in higher education. A brief history of the assessment movement is presented, followed by a comparison of nine principles of Feminist Assessment and the American Association for Higher Education's Principles of Good Practice in Assessing Student Learning. Both sets of principles were developed with support from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. Using the principles of feminist assessment as an organizing framework, reports of assessment practices at various institutions will be offered as illustrations of the contributions of a feminist perspective. A discussion of the important contributions from feminist theory to our understanding of assessment will conclude the paper

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has for a number of years operated in an environment of public skepticism and tightened resources in which it must compete for scarce state and federal funds with claims such as health care and law and order. In an environment of accountability and fiscal belt tightening, the assessment movement thrives, fueled by state mandates and accreditation requirements. The potential power and high stakes consequences of the uses of assessment have led to questions concerning who's interests and voices are heard in evaluating higher education programs and institutions, and whether assessment has been or can be useful as a point of leverage in transforming students' lives for the better. Assessment, writ large to include classroom assessment of student learning through evaluation of program and institutional effectiveness, has the potential to illuminate the values of higher education as well as the processes by which it achieves or fails to achieve its goals. Feminist theory offers the potential to challenge hidden assumptions and beliefs and thereby effect change in ways that can improve the lives of those who have often been invisible, powerless, or disenfranchised. Feminist theory, therefore, offers a critical lens through which to view the values, practices and uses

of assessment in higher education.

This essay traces a brief history of the assessment movement, the development of nine principles of good practice in assessing student learning, and nine principles of feminist assessment. These two sets of principles will be examined for overarching values and connections to feminist theory. The potential contributions of feminist values and theories to assessment will be discussed, illustrated by accounts from actual assessment in practice at institutions across the United States. The essay concludes with a brief consideration of the implications of the contributions of a feminist perspective to assessment practice in higher education.

ROOTS OF ASSESSMENT

The beginnings of the assessment movement in higher education in the United States can be traced back to localized initiatives at a few scattered institutions in the late 1970s. Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, started its comprehensive assessment program in 1973 by publicly articulating eight competencies that students must be able to demonstrate to graduate (Banta & Associates, 1993). Since that time, the name Alverno has become synonymous with authentic performance assessment and Alverno the national leader in the use of that technique. In contrast, assessment in Tennessee meant something entirely different. In 1979, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission mandated performance funding in which a proportion of funding for public institutions was awarded based on gathering and using evidence of student performance (Banta & Associates, 1993). In 1986, the National Governors Association published Time for Results which put forth a call for assessment at public colleges and universities:

The public has a right to know and understand the quality of undergraduate education

> that young people receive from publicly funded colleges....They have a right to know that their resources are being wisely invested...we need more education for the money (Hutchings, 1992, p. 18).

By 1988, the United States Department of Education required the regional and program accreditation organizations to demand "information on student achievement" from the programs and the institutions that they reviewed for accreditation (Hutchings, 1992, p. 19). By 1990, mandates for assessment of student achievement and institutional effectiveness of public colleges and universities existed in 40 states. A 1991 survey by the American Council on Education reported that 81% of colleges and universities are doing assessment, and 67% stated that assessment was part of their self-study for accreditation (Hutchings, 1992). However, the movement that had started as an effort to assess student learning had evolved into an accountability campaign. By 1994, states and public institutions were primarily focused on developing systems of performance indicators to comply with public demands for evidence that higher education was accomplishing its goals in an efficient manner (Gaither, 1996).

ASSESSMENT PRINCIPLES

Tom Angelo (1995) has defined assessment as "an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning" (p. 7). His complete definition includes setting standards, gathering evidence for use in making judgments, and using the results to improve performance. Program and institutional effectiveness are then linked to student learning. As a distinct conceptualization of assessment practice, feminist assessment is compatible with the view expressed by Angelo but seems to take a deeper or more fundamental look at the philosophy underlying assessment. According to Hutchings (1992), feminist assessment is "shaped by a coherent system of values and by feminist

theory" (p. 22). She points out that feminist assessment goes beyond a pragmatic concern with accountability issues that the mainstream assessment movement is often based on. Feminist assessment understands that knowledge is socially constructed, knowers are not separate from the known, and politics are involved in issues of knowledge. Feminist assessment is also committed to empowering the individual student and creating room for her voice to be heard.

Nine principles of feminist assessment (see Appendix) were developed as an outgrowth of a 1989 Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) project designed to study Women's Studies programs nearly 20 years after the first such program was officially sanctioned (Musil, 1992). As part of the project, an advisory team was established composed of national leaders with broad experience in the fields of Women's Studies, assessment, and evaluation. Over the course of the 3-year grant and based on input from participants from the ten institutions involved in the project, the team put together and published (in 1992) a set principles intended to shape and guide assessment efforts.

In the same year, the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) published a list of nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning (see Appendix). These principles were developed with FIPSE support by a panel known as the Study Group, composed of 12 leaders with national reputations in assessment in higher education, under the sponsorship of the AAHE Assessment Forum (AAHE, 1992). In many respects, these two sets of principles overlap substantially. The ways in which they differ are subtle: while both principles explicitly state the centrality of students and student learning, the image and voice of the student come through more clearly in the feminist principles, as does a concern with power, politics, and transformation.

Comparison of Principles

The feminist and the AAHE principles are explicitly concerned with values and with students. The feminist principles "appreciate values" and call for student-centered assessment, meaning that students should be asked as individuals what knowledge and learning adds value to their lives, what do they need and want to learn, and whether or not their needs are being met (Shapiro, 1992, p. 31). The AAHE principles, in locating students in the context of assessment, assert that higher education's responsibilities to students (and the public) are met through assessment. In articulating this principle, the Study Group called for accrediting agencies to hold institutions of higher education accountable for specifying what students should know and be able to do. This call for accountability was sounded in response to public perceptions of a decline in the value of a college education. The AAHE principles state that assessment is founded upon educational values, based on a perhaps utopian vision of shared agreement about what matters in higher education. The issue is, of course, whose values are appreciated and woven into assessment practice: those of the students, faculty, parents, the surrounding community, state governing boards, funding sources, all of the above, some of the above? The images and metaphors evoked by the discussion of values and students in these different sets of principles are consistent with what appear to be their underlying worldviews: a circular or spherical image with students at the center in the feminist principles; a hierarchical or linear image with students at the top (demonstrated by the title) in the AAHE principles.

With regard to the nature and scope of participation, both sets of principles value including many stakeholders in the work of assessment but view participation from a slightly different angle. The feminist interpretation of participatory assessment is specifically intended to include students. Feminist theory considers self-assessment to be an essential and valid element of authentic evaluation

of student learning, and to empowering students by giving them a voice in evaluating their own learning (Shapiro, 1992; Wiggins, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Banta, Lund, Black & Oblander, 1996). In an understanding of the power issues inherent and often invisible in assessment, Terenzini (1993) points out that participation in assessment "gives voice" to those who have been historically excluded. The AAHE principles also call for wide involvement, describing assessment as a collaborative endeavor that is enhanced by the participation of faculty, student affairs professionals, college or university administrators, and members of the external community such as alumni, employers, and members of accrediting bodies. While student participation is encouraged, student self-assessment is often viewed as one of many assessment techniques rather than as an essential feature of assessment, or regarded with skepticism by participants concerned with the validity and reliability of self-reported achievement (Popham, 1990; Gronlund, 1993; Pike, 1996).

Both sets of principles understand that assessment does not take place in a vacuum but must be viewed within an organizational context. Feminist critical theory is particularly concerned with context from an historical perspective, basing much of its critique of social institutions on the historical conditions that give rise to assumptions and power structures that eventually become invisible or appear "natural". Feminist assessment principles consider institutional culture to be the context of assessment and understand the profound effect that culture has on the way assessment becomes manifest in a college or university. The AAHE principles also recognize the powerful influence of organization environment, but describe environment in terms of the institution's mission and decision making structure. In other words, the Study Group recognized that, to the degree that faculty members and administrators perceive assessment data as vital to decision making, assessment will be ranked as a higher priority and receive greater support. This is particularly true if assessment

data are linked to decisions about curricular and/or budgetary matters.

The preceding discussion highlighted similarities between the two sets of principles; the remaining discussion will serve to highlight differences. The five remaining feminist principles relate to feminist theory's concern with power, politics, and pedagogy. Social criticism is a fundamental aspect of feminism as a particular form of critical theory. Thus, feminist assessment "questions almost everything related to evaluation" (Shapiro, 1992, p. 33) in an understanding that politics and power underlie issues of knowledge. Important assessment issues are, therefore, what counts as knowledge, who decides what counts, and how will the results of assessment be used? In addition, as Shapiro (1992) articulates, these principles demand that assessment activities must be "compatible with feminist activist beliefs" (p. 33), "shaped by ... feminist pedagogy" (p. 34), and "based on feminist scholarship" (p. 35). This means that social change and improvement in the lives of students is an expected and desired outcome of the use of assessment data, that assessment should take place in an environment in which pedagogy is rooted in relationships, and diversity is appreciated and experiential knowledge is valued.

The remaining AAHE principles are related to learning as a complex process and the utility of assessment data. The principles state that assessment is more likely to yield valid data and help improve practice if student learning is understood as a complex process. In other words, any assessment of learning should include a consideration of core content, the integration of knowledge and application, and student attitudes and dispositions. Assessment must also account for the processes as well as the outcomes of learning. Measurement taken only at the beginning and the end of the educational experience assumes that learning takes place linearly and proportionately over the intervening years, and fails to identify many point during the educational experience at which

improvements may be made. The final AAHE principles convey a sense of the importance of utility, and characteristics that might enhance the applicability and the likelihood of the use of assessment data. Assessment is more useful if the system is strongly connected to program goals that are in turn linked to institutional mission. In fact, if program goals are not clear, the questions that arise in assessment can help illuminate and clarify goals. Assessment data are most valued and used to improve practice if data are connected to issues of importance to the participants and to the institution, if data are reported in ways that are meaningful to the campus community, if data are credible and applicable to real world problems. Finally, assessment is most effective when it is imbedded in the culture of the organization, collected and analyzed and reported on an ongoing rather than one-shot basis (AAHE, 1992).

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PRACTICE

Principles are generally intended to guide practice. The feminist principles, when combined with the AAHE principles, offer a way to engage in a more critical practice in conducting assessment. To illustrate this point, the paper will turn to a description of various institutions engaged in assessment activities that illuminate feminist principles.

Feminist assessment appreciates values, ranging from social responsibility to awareness of diversity to the importance of asking questions. Like feminist theory, it assumes knowledge can not and should not be value-free. The University of South Carolina at Sumter has designed a student development transcript to assess and encourage certain values that the university feels are important, including student involvement in campus and community life and life-long learning (Banta et al., 1996). The University of Michigan-Dearborn discovered through assessment efforts that students

had substantial prejudicial attitudes toward members of certain ethnic and racial groups and toward students with disabilities (Banta et al.). As a result of this finding, the university expanded multicultural experiences throughout the university, in the curriculum and the extra-curriculum. The university also tried to foster student awareness of social and environment concerns by creating internship opportunities and seminars.

Student-centered, self-assessment practices are found in many institutions. King's College in Pennsylvania uses a Sophomore-Junior Diagnostic Project that provides valuable information to faculty about student learning but is primarily designed to give students insight into their own learning and personal development (Banta et al., 1996). The assessment, which is designed by the faculty of the individual departments, is imbedded in a required course in the major area. Each department has designed a diagnostic project that emphasizes the skills and abilities that students will need after graduation in as authentic a format as possible. DePaul University in Chicago has used problem-based learning concepts to design the assessment program for its School for New Learning (Banta et al.). The school's mission statement, philosophy, and pedagogy all rest on the assumption of "learner-centeredness" (Banta et al., p. 27). Among the critical elements of the schools assessment program are self-assessment and feedback that are imbedded in the learning process and the opportunity for students to direct their own learning and assessment. Lynn University in Florida uses a mentoring program for freshman to quickly identify and help at risk students during their first critical semester at college (Banta et al.). The mentoring program is also used as an assessment tool by gathering data on changes in student perceptions, motivations, and skills over the first year and by eliciting student evaluations of the mentors and the program's effectiveness in helping them adjust to college.

Feminist assessment understands that institutional culture has a profound impact on assessment. The Sociology department at the State University of New York College at Buffalo gave careful consideration to the composition and character of its student body in designing an assessment plan to measure the relationship between student learning and skills required for future jobs. Because students were primarily commuters going to school part-time while holding down full-time jobs, an assessment was devised that could be administered during a normal class meeting and was sensitive to "different stages in student progress" (Banta et al., 1996, p. 139). Mt. Hood Community College in Oregon designed an assessment program to improve retention due to its large population of underprepared learners (Banta et al.). The college used transcript analysis and student surveys to determine what student attitudes and goals were most consistent with academic success. As a result of the assessment program, placement testing and advising have been implemented, links have been forged with local high schools to prepare students for college, and curriculum have been revised to make course content more meaningful to students.

A tenet of feminist activist beliefs enacted in assessment is the importance of improving student lives in the process of performing assessment activities. At the University of Memphis, assessment has led faculty to become aware of student perceptions of the value-system and pedagogy of the institution (Banta et. al., 1996). As a result, faculty have changed their own teaching to be more compatible with student needs and have begun to reconceptualize how general education is implemented at the institution. At the University of Montevallo in Alabama, an assessment effort revealed that students in the psychology program wanted more of a voice in curricular matters on an ongoing basis (Banta et al.). As a result, a student advisory council was created to allow students formal input. Several revisions in curriculum and pedagogy have resulted from student suggestions.

More importantly, curriculum changes and increased involvement of students in decision making has led to improved writing and presentation skills in those students, and a sense of power, voice, and investment in their own learning and in the institution. This illustration, and the ones described in the preceding paragraphs, point to the contributions of feminist principles in engaging in a more critical practice in conducting assessment.

FEMINIST THEORY CHALLENGES FOR ASSESSMENT

Feminist theory offers two important contributions to the assessment conversation: an understanding that power and politics underlie issues of knowledge; and, an activist perspective or the idea that this work can and should transform as well as inform our practice.

Courts and McInerney (1993) state that "the approaches to assessment we choose to adopt, adapt, or create will reflect our assumptions about the value of learning and the roles of the participants" (p. 27). Furthermore, Astin (1996) points out that, with regard to assessment, "our choices both of student outcomes and of instruments for measuring these outcomes are ultimately based on value judgements" (p. 132). Feminist thought challenges those who think and work in the field to make a commitment to question everything related to assessment, particularly the values and assumptions that issues of knowledge and assessment rest on. In general, mainstream assessment practice seems to be founded on the assumption that the nature of knowledge is not problematic, that there are no systematic differences in ways of knowing that need to be accounted for, and that improvement is defined as an incremental increase in student learning rather than including new or more diverse kinds of learning. Feminist principles attempt to raise awareness of and questions about basic assumptions and beliefs, opening up the assessment conversation to the possibility that some

people/ideas/ways of knowing have been privileged and other made invisible.

Feminist research has contributed much to our understanding of the complex nature of knowledge. Code (1991) and other feminists have defined knowledge more broadly and inclusively, and in a multidimensional and multiperspectival way in the belief that the traditional view of knowledge has privileged objective knowledge that distances the knower from the known, objectifies the subject of study, and constructs knowledge using an experimental model. Feminist theory claims that knowledge is a construct, and claims to pure objectivity come from the preoccupations of privileged knowers (Code, 1991) and from the illusion of objectivity claimed by social scientists who have subjectively excluded women's' experiences from knowledge claims (Harding, 1993). Feminist theory also claims that emotion and intellect are mutually sustaining in the construction of knowledge and that "knowledge is neither value-free nor value-neutral" (Code, 1991, p. 70).

Gender differences in student learning have been studied for at least two decades (Gilligan, 1982; Clinchy and Zimmerman, 1982/1993; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986; Baxter-Magolda, 1992). Baxter-Magolda (1992) conducted a longitudinal study of gender-based epistemological development of students at a 4-year public college located in the Midwest. Her study describes distinct ways of knowing and the finding that when pedagogy matches students' epistemology, students learn better and are more invested in learning. She asserts that pedagogy should not simply support a student's way of knowing, but should also challenge it in a manner which fosters growth (Baxter-Magolda, 1993). Baxter-Magolda's work is related to the work of Belenky et al. (1986) in creating a model wherein knowers construct knowledge through dialogue with others, through their own experiences and intuition, through an understanding of the role of situation and context, and through the power of their own reason.

Palmer (1987) claims that higher education has embraced a distanced and objectified view of knowledge with far-reaching consequences. This theory of knowledge and its construction fosters individualism and competition. It is incompatible with a sense of community, and disassociates learning from everyday life for students. Palmer (1987) presents a compelling argument that the prevailing view of knowledge and epistemology is transferred to students when it is promoted by pedagogy, legitimized by assessment, and reported to the public. The result is that students learn to distance themselves from learning, believe that knowledge is objective, that the path to true knowledge lies in experimentation, and that cognition has a higher value than community.

CONCLUSION

Assessment information enjoys a unique privilege and position of power in higher education. It provides the basis for evaluating what students learn and for judging faculty/program/institutional effectiveness. At its best, assessment "gets at" the essence of our values, our purposes, and our practices. At its worst, it is dismissed as another fad or administrative initiative, or resented as an external threat from "the barbarians at the gate". To borrow from Berlak (1992) a phrase used in connection with construct validity in educational testing, we in higher education would do well to recognize that assessment information "is the product of power and its use is the exercise of power" (p. 185). Feminist thought would remind us as educators to recognize this power, to thoughtfully challenge ourselves about our assumptions and values, to consider how our assessment practices privilege or disenfranchise certain individuals or groups, and to use this information in the service of students, to empower students, and to shape and improve our educational practices.

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Appendix

Principles of Feminist Assessment

Principle 1: Feminist assessment appreciates values

Principle 2: Feminist assessment is student-centered

Principle 3: Feminist assessment is participatory

Principle 4: Feminist assessment is deeply affected by its context or institutional culture

Principle 5: Feminist assessment questions almost everything related to evaluation

Principle 6: Feminist assessment approaches should be compatible with feminist activist beliefs

Principle 7: Feminist assessment is heavily shaped by the power of feminist pedagogy

Principle 8: Feminist assessment is based on a body of feminist scholarship and feminist research methodology that is central to this interdisciplinary area

Principle 9: Feminist assessment is decentered

Association of American Colleges and National Women's Studies Association
Musil, C. M. (Ed.) (1992). Students at the center: Feminist assessment. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges.

Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning

Principle 1: The assessment of student learning begins with educational values

Principle 2: Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public

Principle 3: Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved

Principle 4: Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change

Principle 5: Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes

Principle 6: Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes

Principle 7: Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time

Principle 8: Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about

Principle 9: Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic

American Association for Higher Education Assessment Forum
American Association for Higher Education (1992). Principles of good practice for assessing student learning. Washington, D.C.: AAHE.